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## The Presentation of Child Trafficking in the UK

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## **The Presentation of Child Trafficking in the UK: An Old and New Moral Panic?**

### Introduction

The trafficking of children is a subject which is probably one of the most anxiety-provoking issues facing social work and social workers in the UK today. New child trafficking units, usually involving social workers and police officers, have been established in many of the major centres of population and guidance on identifying and working with trafficked children has been drafted by many local authorities across the UK. All this activity might suggest that we are being confronted by a severe and growing problem, one which demands increasing attention and resources. But is this really so? This article will suggest that we need to take a step back from the rhetoric, to consider more broadly what is going on here. We will argue that the presentation of child trafficking follows the familiar pattern of a moral panic, drawing attention away from more perplexing and, we believe, more difficult issues confronting social work.

The article will begin by discussing the phenomenon of moral panics, as first explored by Cohen (1972) in his seminal study of 'Mods' and 'Rockers' in the 1960s. We will then go on to look at the presentation of child trafficking at two historical moments, that is, the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. The nineteenth century story, although familiar to social historians, is likely to be less well-known to a social work audience. It centres on a series of articles entitled, 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of our Secret Commission', published in 1885 in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, a popular daily newspaper in London. The series reported on the newspaper's investigations into juvenile prostitution in London and the 'white slave trade', telling the story of the purchase and subsequent removal to France of a thirteen-year old girl ('Lily') for the purposes of prostitution. The twenty-first century account examines the establishment in 2006 of the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre ([www.ceop.gov.uk/](http://www.ceop.gov.uk/)).

This organisation was given the national lead on child trafficking in the UK three years later, following on from the launch of the UK Action Plan on Human Trafficking by the Home Office and Scottish Government in October 2009. CEOP published its first *Strategic Threat Assessment* report on child trafficking in the UK in 2009, updating it in 2010 (CEOP, 2010).

Before getting into the ‘moral panic’ literature, however, it is important to clarify some of the terms which will be used in this article. Firstly, the phrase ‘juvenile prostitution’ which was widely used in the ‘Maiden Tribute’ series and in other publications of the day was often used more generally to refer to child sexual abuse. Middle-class Victorian campaigners, while focusing on the buying and selling of children for sex, were in reality concerned more broadly with working-class children’s sexuality, and with preventing children and young people from engaging in sexual practices of any kind (hence their long struggle to raise the age of sexual consent) (own author, 1995). This was in line with their religious and moral view that sex was for procreation only; that children (and, to a lesser extent, women) were asexual beings who should be protected from the dangerous and damaging consequences of sexual behaviour (own author, 1995; Jackson, 2006). The term ‘white slave trade’ reminds us that the philanthropists and moral entrepreneurs who brought this subject to the public’s attention in the late nineteenth century had previously campaigned for the abolition of black slavery. When their emancipation crusade was finally successful, they turned their focus to something they identified as a new kind of slavery; that is, the entrapment and movement of white young people to brothels in Europe (Pearson, 1972). Use of the word ‘white’ deliberately contrasted with that of the ‘black’ slave trade. It also, however, hints to insidious racism; to the idea that ‘our’ British-born white youths were being corrupted by immoral ‘foreigners’ (Weeks, 1981). Turning to the present day, the term ‘human trafficking’ was defined in 2000 by the United

Nations 'Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children' (known as the Palermo Protocol) as:

'the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation'

<http://www.osce.org/odihr/19223>.

Translated to refer specifically to children, the term has been used in consideration of everything from baby adoption to 'forced labour, benefit fraud and criminal enterprise' (CEOP, 2010: 5), and, of course, sexual exploitation, and it is this which has engendered most public and professional concern. We will now consider the concept of moral panics.

### Moral panics in theory and practice

Stanley Cohen brought the term 'moral panic' to the sociological and public imagination with his book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, first published in 1972. He introduces the term as follows:

'Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. ... Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore or collective memory; at

other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives of itself' (Cohen, 1972: 28).

In another classic study of moral panics, *Policing the Crisis*, (1978) Stuart Hall and his colleagues emphasise the consensual nature of moral panics; they succeed because we all 'buy into' their definition of the problem:

'When the official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is *out of all proportion* to the actual threat offered, when "experts" in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians and editors *perceive* the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk "with one voice" of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions, when the media representations universally stress "sudden and dramatic" increases (in numbers involved or events) and "novelty" above and beyond that which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a *moral panic*' (Hall et al, 1978: 16).

Subsequent analyses have taken further the idea of moral panics, but all agree that the following elements are likely to be present: a threat or concern; stereotypical presentation of this; consensus about what the problem is and hostility towards it; and disproportionality in the presentation of the problem and the response to it (see Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Young, 2009; Weeks, 1985). Garland (2008) stresses the underlying moral dimension to the social reaction. Watney meanwhile argues that moral panics 'mark the site of *permanent* ideological struggle over the meanings of signs'. 'We do not', he argues 'witness the unfolding of discontinuous and discrete "moral panics", but rather the mobility of ideological confrontation across the entire field of public representations, and in particular those handling and evaluating the meanings of the human body, where rival and incompatible forces and

values are involved in a ceaseless struggle to define supposedly universal “human” truths’ (1987: 41-42).

We will now examine in more detail our two examples of the presentation of child trafficking to assess the usefulness of the idea of ‘moral panic’ for making sense of what is happening here, before going on to analyse the underlying issues.

### The ‘Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of our Secret Commission’, July 1885

On 4<sup>th</sup> July 1885, William T. Stead, editor of London’s *Pall Mall Gazette*, issued a ‘frank warning’ to his readers, that over the next few days, the newspaper would publish a series of revelations which would ‘open the eyes of the public’ to a serious social evil. This was the widespread existence of ‘juvenile prostitution’ in London and the presence of an organised traffic (what is referred to as a ‘white slave trade’) in young English girls to supply brothels on the Continent (Gorham, 1978). Stead explained that the purpose of the expose was to bring about a change in the law; the method of achieving this was to shock people into action. He wrote:

‘Therefore we say quite frankly to-day that all those who are squeamish, and all those who are prudish, and all those who prefer to live in a fool’s paradise of imaginary innocence and purity, selfishly oblivious to the horrible realities which torment those whose lives are passed in the London Inferno, will do well not to read the *Pall Mall Gazette* of Monday and the three following days. The story of an actual pilgrimage into a real hell is not pleasant reading, and is not meant to be. ... But it is true, and its publication is necessary.’ (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1885.)

The articles which followed in ‘The Maiden Tribute’ series were indeed sensational. They were full of lurid stories about the abduction and rape of ‘maids’ (virgins) by

upper-class (sometimes described as 'foreign') letharios, about virginity checks and abortions by corrupt doctors and midwives, about underground rooms where the cries of children could not be heard, and even down to the detail of the leather straps which were used to tie young girls to the four posts of a bed. The account of Lily's purchase was particularly distasteful. Lily was said to have been sold by her mother to a brothel-keeper for a sovereign (to buy alcohol, so it was claimed), although Stead did admit in his article that her mother thought Lily was going to a 'situation' (a position as a domestic servant). Lily was sold for £5 to a procuress, who paid £3 on hand-over and promised another £2 when Lily's virginity was established. Lily was subsequently physically examined by someone described as a 'midwife', and then taken to a brothel where she was drugged with chloroform and put to bed. The first instalment of the series ends with the following words:

'A few moments later the door opened, and the purchaser entered the bedroom. He closed and locked the door. There was a brief silence. And then there rose a wild and piteous cry – not a loud shriek, but a helpless, startled scream like the bleat of a frightened lamb. And the child's voice was heard crying, in accents of terror, "There's a man in the room! Take me home; oh, take me home!" And then all once more was still. That was but one case among many, and by no means the worst. It only differs from the rest because I have been able to verify the facts. Many a similar cry will be raised this very night in the brothels of London, unheeded by man, but not unheard by the pitying ear of Heaven – For the child's sob in the darkness curseth deeper than the strong man in his wrath.' (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 6<sup>th</sup> July, 1885.)

Readers had to wait until following episodes to learn that Lily had not, in fact, been raped on that dreadful night. Instead, she had been taken secretly to France, out of the public gaze, while the storm which accompanied the series was unleashed. It is reported that in spite of being outlawed as obscene, the newspapers sold in their



thousands, exchanging hands for ten times their normal price on the 'black market'; the articles were then published in book form, translated and sold all over Europe and America (Bristow, 1977; Gorham, 1978; Pearson 1972).

To understand why this is important today, we need to examine why it emerged when it did, and what its consequences were, for the individuals concerned and for society as a whole.

### *The story behind the series*

Debates about prostitution and sexual morality were a prominent feature of nineteenth century life in the UK and the US. Prostitution, rape and 'white slavery' were common themes in novels and 'penny dreadful' publications from the 1830s onwards. Prostitution was not seen just as a matter of private sexual conduct; it was symbolic of social evil (Mort, 1987). Prostitution received particular attention during the mid-nineteenth century because of its assumed connection with venereal diseases (mainly syphilis and gonorrhoea). The Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 were introduced by the British government in an attempt to improve the poor physical condition of the British armed forces. The Acts allowed for the registration, physical examination and isolation of women who were deemed to be working as prostitutes at military stations, garrisons and seaside towns across southern England and Ireland (Clement, 2006). Women who were found to have a sexually transmitted disease were taken to locked wards in hospitals and could be contained for up to two years; no such action was taken against the (male) soldiers (Walkowitz, 1980 and 1982). The passing of the Acts led to twenty years of unrest, as campaigners argued that the only way to end prostitution was through abolition, not statutory regulation. The Acts were finally suspended in 1883 and repealed in 1886.

Those who campaigned against the CD Acts were also concerned about regulated prostitution in the Colonies and on the Continent. In 1880, Josephine Butler, prominent feminist and social purity activist, published a protest against 'the sexual servitude of young girls', claiming that girls as young as 12 were being incarcerated in Belgian brothels (Mumm, 2006: 57). In 1881, a Select Committee of the House of Lords was set up 'to inquire into the law for the protection of young girls from artifices to induce them to lead a corrupt life, and into the means of amending the same.' The Committee concluded that most British prostitutes working abroad were already professional prostitutes before they left home. The Committee also instigated an investigation into 'juvenile prostitution', and accepted the view of police officials that this was a problem (Pearson, 1972); the 1881 Industrial Schools (Amendment) Act reflects this concern. The Committee also recommended that the age of sexual consent be raised to 16 years; that police be given powers to search private premises for juveniles; and that the age of abduction for immoral purposes be raised to 21 years (Bristow 1977). In 1883, a Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill was introduced, containing these and other proposals. Like the CD Acts before it, this Bill was a subject of considerable dispute. It spent two years in parliament, and looked ready to be dropped, until Josephine Butler and Bramwell Booth of the Salvation Army approached William Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, to enlist his help in a plan to change public opinion and ensure that the Bill would become law (Bristow, 1977).

The ground was thus laid many years before the 'Maiden Tribute' series was published. Jackson argues that the series did not create the moral climate; instead it 'focused public attention on the matter, mobilising grass roots concerns that had been in existence long before 1885' (2000: 43). William Stead himself admitted that he had 'only struck the match that fired a charged mine of enthusiasm' (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 22<sup>nd</sup> August: 15).

### *Events which followed the series*

The interim Conservative government was forced to carry out its own investigations into Stead's allegations. These confirmed the existence of the white slave trade, but questioned the extent of the problem. Protest meetings continued throughout Britain, and a petition with allegedly 393,000 signatures was presented to Parliament (Bristow, 1977). The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act was quickly passed and a new voluntary organisation, the National Vigilance Association (NVA), was launched a week later, to ensure that the legislation was enforced, and to press for further legislation 'if deemed necessary' (own author, 1995: 23). The Act's main provisions were as follows:

1. It became an offence to procure a woman under 21 years of age for prostitution - those found guilty were liable to a prison sentence of not less than two years;
2. The age of sexual consent was raised from 13 to 16 years (it had been raised from 12 to 13 years in 1875);
3. Anyone who detained a woman or a girl for the purposes of unlawful sex, in any brothel or other premises was guilty of an offence;
4. Any male found committing homosexual acts in private or public could be sent to prison for up to two years (the infamous 'Labouchere amendment' which was not repealed until 1967);
5. Financial penalties or imprisonment were imposed on anyone found guilty of keeping, managing, assisting, owning or renting out premises used as a brothel, or for the purposes of prostitution.

The Criminal Law Amendment Act had a number of consequences, both immediate and longer term. At national level, there was a flurry of activity. NVA branches opened throughout Britain so that by 1888, there were 300 affiliated groups (Bristow, 1977). Women working as prostitutes were vulnerable and under attack, forced to

work on the streets rather than in the comparative safety of brothels or rented rooms (Walkowitz, 1980 and 1982). At the same time, male homosexuals were charged with indecent behaviour and imprisoned in great numbers. In 1886, the NVA recommended wide-ranging legislative changes to further tighten the laws, including the raising of the age of consent to eighteen years. In 1908, an Act was passed criminalising incest in England and Wales. In 1909, another Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill was introduced, and finally passed in 1912, extending the powers of the 1885 Act by giving courts discretionary powers to whip as well as imprison men convicted of procuring or living off the earnings of prostitutes. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 1922 was the last piece of legislation on this subject, lengthening the period during which a victim could lodge a complaint to nine months (Own author, 1995).

International activity also burgeoned, fuelled by fresh press allegations about enforced prostitution of juveniles in brothels abroad. The first international congress organised by the NVA was held in London in 1899, launching the International Bureau for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic. In 1921, the League of Nations took over the campaigning work of the International Bureau, and during the 1920s and 1930s, cooperated with the NVA on seeking agreements between countries on the repatriation of prostitutes, on the traffic of women and children, on the abolition of 'licensed houses' (regulated brothels) and on assistance for expelled foreign prostitutes (Own author, 1995; Gorman, 2008). The NVA gave practical help and advice to young people, as a way of preventing their slide into immorality and prostitution. Its Guild of Service for Women, begun in 1903, posted workers at the stations and docks, to befriend young British women who were travelling alone, and to turn away any foreign prostitutes who tried to disembark in Britain. It also escorted women and girls disembarking from emigration ships in Australia and Canada (Own

author, 1995). (Another 'protection' organisation, the Young Women's Christian Association, launched a similar organisation, the Travellers Aid Society, in 1885.)

The NVA did not remain as an independent agency, either nationally or internationally. Its two last UK branches merged in 1952 and then closed in 1971, and the international work was gradually subsumed by the United Nations. The issue which had precipitated the establishment of the NVA did not, however, disappear, as we shall see from an examination of the current presentation of child trafficking.

### Presentation of child trafficking and sexual exploitation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

There is a huge amount of interest in child trafficking today. The international child protection agency, UNICEF, demonstrates the tenor of this. It states on its website that child trafficking is a global problem affecting large numbers of children who are 'trafficked for cheap labour and sexual exploitation', with estimates that as many as 1.2 million are trafficked every year ([www.unicef.org/](http://www.unicef.org/)). UNICEF asserts that child trafficking is lucrative and linked with criminal activity and corruption; furthermore, it is hidden and hard to address. Child trafficking is also of major concern in the UK. As already stated, the government-led Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) has held the national lead on child trafficking since 2009. It first published its first *Strategic Threat Assessment* report on child trafficking in the UK in 2009, updated in 2010 (CEOP, 2010). This begins with the assertion that many UK professionals who work with children 'still do not believe that child trafficking is a problem in their neighbourhood', yet, the report continues:

'Evidence shows this is not true. Boys and girls of all ages are trafficked into and throughout the UK from all over the world and exploited for many different purposes including sexual exploitation, forced labour, benefit fraud and criminal enterprise (such as the cultivation of cannabis and street crime ' (CEOP, 2010: 5).

The *Strategic Threat Assessment* alleges that 287 children from 47 countries were indentified as 'potential victims of trafficking' during the period 1 March 2009 to 28 February 2010. Most were from Vietnam (58), Nigeria (40), China (24), and 'a significant number' of Roma children (32) were also identified (CEOP, 2010: 6). The report notes a decline in the number of Chinese 'victims of trafficking' in this period. Where the type of exploitation was identified (219 cases), 35% (76) of children were sexually exploited, most of whom were female. Eighteen per cent (39) were 'exploited for cannabis cultivation', 11% (25) for domestic service, 11% (23) for benefit fraud, 9% (19) for labour exploitation, 9% (20) for street crime, 4% (8) for 'servile marriage', 2% (4) for illegal adoption and 2% (5) for 'various other types of exploitation' (ibid.). Where age was identified (229 cases), 71% of potential victims (164) were between 14 and 17 years of age; 56% (160) were female as compared with 34% (99) who were male (gender was unknown in 10% (28) cases). The 'largest and most significant trend' during the survey period was said to be Vietnamese boys aged 13 to 17 'exploited as "gardeners" cultivating cannabis plants in cannabis factories' (ibid.). The report points out that a 'considerable number of potential victims of trafficking' go missing from local authority provided care; 35 are said to have done so, and some have then re-emerged in cannabis factories (ibid.).

What are we to make of this? The report admits that there were difficulties with the data collection. Although 21 police forces across the UK responded to the request for information, eleven responded with nil returns. Data was gathered 'in the form of intelligence logs, with a number of forces compiling a small report or spreadsheet in response to the data request'. Significantly, as in the 2009 *Strategic Threat Assessment*, 'responses were not received from a number of forces containing major ports believed to be used for child trafficking' (CEOP, 2010: 13). Seventeen responses were received from children's services, ten of whom responded with nil

returns. The report notes that trafficking offences are often recorded by police under a different or lesser offence, because it is easier to prosecute for an exploitation offence rather than a trafficking offence (CEOP, 2010: 12). Moreover, it is 'often difficult to evidence that a child was brought to the UK against their will' (ibid.). This, of course, might lead us (as the report suggests) to conclude that the 'real' figure is much larger. But what if it is smaller? Can we be sure that all those said in this report to have been trafficked were, in fact, victims of child trafficking?

The *Strategic Threat Assessment*, again like the 'Maiden Tribute', uses specific examples to highlight the issues being presented. Some of these scenarios describe the physical and sexual abuse experienced by children. Others do not, and some seem rather unclear narratives of trafficking. For example, an 'anecdotal story' which relates to minors said to be trafficked from South Asia is presented as follows:

'A family may enter on a tourist visa, leaving a child behind in the UK on their return. This child is taken to an asylum screening unit with a sponsor, having been coached to recite a tragic story in relation to their family and his or her reason to claim asylum. The child will then enter a private fostering relationship with their sponsors. When the child is granted asylum or residence, the family will return to the UK and apply for residence on the back of a family reunion visa' (CEOP, 2010: 33).

Is this an example of child trafficking? A clue to this question lies in the report's use of the word 'potential'; children are almost always referred to as 'potential' victims of trafficking. This links to a bigger question about the reliability of evidence about sex trafficking in general. In October 2009, Nick Davies of *The Guardian* concluded that the UK's biggest ever investigation of sex trafficking failed to find a single person who had forced anybody into prostitution, in spite of hundreds of raids on sex workers in a

six-month campaign by government departments, specialist agencies and every police force in the country.

The *Strategic Threat Assessment*, like the 'Maiden Tribute' investigation before it, is peppered with insinuations and torrid language. For example, in the section which reports on the recruitment, transportation, control and coercion of victims, the following text is reproduced in bold, with arrows to indicate its seriousness:

'Anecdotally, girls who are trafficked to work in brothels are often raped by the agent en-route to break down their resistance to abuse so that they are more likely to accept exploitation' (CEOP, 2010: 18).

There is also, like the 'Maiden Tribute' series, an undercurrent of what comes across as racist stereotypes:

'...the trafficking of African children is more opportunistic, perpetrated by one or a small number of individuals and differs greatly from the structured organised criminal networks that traffic Vietnamese and Chinese children' (CEOP, 2010: 29).

Critically, the *Strategic Threat Assessment* ends with a restatement of the definition of the problem and a call to arms, again presented in bold text:

'The number of trafficking investigations and successful prosecutions must increase in order to act as a deterrent to traffickers and make the UK a hostile environment for this crime type' (CEOP, 2010 : 36).

A recently published Scottish Government 'scoping study' (SCCYP, 2010) follows the familiar approach and structure of the *Strategic Threat Assessment* and the 'Maiden Tribute'. It begins with a preface by Tam Baillie, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and young People:



‘When children are sold, or stolen, or simply taken off the street and transported thousands of miles, it is an international scandal. When children are raped or exploited as slaves in households or “businesses” in Scotland, it becomes our national scandal. When we fail to notice, fail to pick up the signs and fail to act on children’s trauma, it demands action’ (SCCYP, 2010: 5).

These are stirring words – like those of William Stead before him – how are we to fail to be moved, and to wish to act? Reading the report more closely, like the *Strategic Threat Assessment*, the number of children reported to have been trafficked is much less than the heavy warnings might suggest. In total, fourteen cases were received by the UKBA Office for Scotland and Northern Ireland; of those, five ‘demonstrated reasonable grounds of having been trafficked’ and of those five, ‘four later received positive conclusive decisions’ (SCCYP, 2010: 12). Eight cases were said to be ‘pending’. The report notes that of the fourteen ‘possible cases’, three related to boys and eleven girls; the majority of cases involved children between the ages of 14 and 18, although one child was two and another four years of age (SCCYP, 2010: 39). The explanation given throughout the report for the low number of trafficked children is ‘lack of awareness’ and a discrepancy between the numbers of children practitioners said they were concerned about in their web-based survey about the actual number of reported cases. On the basis of this, the report suggests that there are ‘likely to have been over 200 children’ trafficked (SCCYP, 2010: 13). Another telling statistic, however, is that there had been no convictions for trafficking offences in Scotland (SCCYP, 2010: 14).

The Scottish report ends like all scandals (see also Butler and Drakeford, 2003) with a series of recommendations, to the UK government, the Scottish government, local authorities, police forces and the UK Border Agency in Scotland. The recommendations argue for an increase in multi-agency cooperation, increased

priority across the board (including the appointment of 'Human Trafficking Rapporteurs'), more training, and, importantly, more investigations of child trafficking and more resources to tackle this.

### Discussion

We believe that the presentation of child trafficking in the two historical moments clearly resonates with the concept of a moral panic. We have, firstly, the identification of a threat or concern, presented in a stereotypical way. Child trafficking is, fundamentally, a morality tale of 'goodies' (the innocent child victims, whom Stead had called 'daughters of the people'), 'baddies' (the cruel perpetrators, often portrayed as 'foreigners') and 'saviours' (the police officers, social workers, politicians and NGO workers who bring this issue to the public's attention and 'save' children from harm). Even the plot of the 'white slave' story had been rehearsed many times before, demonstrating Watney's (1987) assertion that moral panics demonstrate sites of perpetual ideological struggle, not simply isolated 'flair-ups' of concern. The moral panic comes to a head in the publication of 'investigations' which are, at the very least, inconclusive in their findings, although not presented as such, and finally reaches its zenith with the passing of punitive legislation.

But what are we to make of this? How are we to respond to something which, although to a degree a fabricated concern, is, nevertheless, deeply troubling to us as social workers and as human beings? These are critical questions which must be addressed because as social workers, we cannot simply sit on the theoretical fence, looking down on the messy world of practice.

The first lesson which emerges is that as a profession, we need to question orthodoxies; to stand back from understandings promoted by others (police, medics, politicians, media etc) and foreground our own, *social work* values and perspectives.

A social work analysis might suggest that although there may be a lack of 'proof' about the extent of child trafficking, there is considerable evidence of people 'on the move', and this inevitably includes children and young people. People migrate for very many reasons, both positive and negative. In a London-based study, Pearce (2011) points out that there are likely to be 'push' and 'pull' factors affecting children who are thought to have been trafficked. They leave behind poverty, war, persecution and natural disasters in the hope of employment, education, or the promise of 'a better life'. Many, she argues, will have experienced 'abuse and neglect that have interrupted or denied them their childhood' (2011: 3); others will have had to grow up very quickly, perhaps estranged from their families, in situations of armed conflict and child labour. In a recent study conducted in Glasgow, Rigby (2011) notes the connection between trafficked children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children under the age of 18 years who are claiming asylum in their own right. Bauman, meanwhile, argues that because there are so few 'settled places' left in the world, more and more people are becoming 'vagabonds' (1998: 29). This suggests that there is a positive role for social work here which is a supportive, empowering one, not a policing one.

Another important lesson for social work concerns children's agency. O'Connell-Davidson (2005) notes that 'concepts of childhood, agency and consent can become confused for trafficked children and young people' (2011: 2). They can also, we believe, become confused for academic researchers, pressure groups and social work practitioners. According to the Palermo Protocol (2000), a child shall mean any person under eighteen years of age, corresponding to the age category first enshrined in the United Nations Charter on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989. Many of the 'children' who have been targeted by agencies as 'trafficked children' are 16 and 17 years of age, considered young adults in their home countries (and in Scotland where children can marry without parental permission at 16 years). By

treating them as minors, we may undermine their agency. The issue of age and trafficked children is further complicated because it may be necessary for them to present as 'children' in receiving countries whether or not they are over 18 years, otherwise they are likely to be treated as illegal immigrants and imprisoned or deported, rather than supported as children in need.

Although the notion of agency is associated with age, it is not only about age. Article 3(b) of the Palermo Protocol states that 'consent' to take up work in prostitution is 'irrelevant' if any power or threat or force has been used. Similarly, Article 3(c) states that the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation should be considered as trafficking 'even if there has been no threat or force or abuse of power'. What this tells us is that child trafficking can never be assumed to be consensual; children cannot agree to be trafficked. But does it not seem likely that a 17-year old might agree to be trafficked, in order to escape to a safer country? Pearce (2011) tells us that children and young people do not tend to describe themselves as either trafficked or exploited. Nevertheless, this did not mean that they did not have strong views about the treatment that they had received at the hands of some adults. This mirrors a recent study of child labour in Nigeria in which Okoli and Own author (2011) point out that although children did not see selling in street markets as abuse per se, they were very clear when adults stepped over the line and treated them abusively. Assuming a lack of agency undermines the choices made by children and young people, and demonstrates the way in which contemporary constructions of childhood and adolescence assume the dependence and incapacities of children, rather than their strengths and capacities. In a study of young people's involvement in prostitution, Shaw and Butler assert, 'adult myth-making about children and childhood reflects and maintains the relative powerlessness of children and ensures that they have little recognition as potential authors of their own biography' (1998: 180). Breuil's more recent study of children

and young people in Marseille indicates that even those who have been trafficked felt that they had some kind of agency. 'Being trafficked', she writes, 'does not always and for every child mean the definitive end of her or his own choices and power, and neither does escaping the trafficking situation automatically mean regaining control over one's life' (2008: 229). On the contrary, young people who were helped to escape from traffickers had to give up some of their agency, because they had to do what the NGO which was 'supporting' them told them to do. This offers a possible explanation for why larger numbers of 'trafficked' young people in the UK go 'missing' from care.

Another lesson concerns 'race', or rather, racism. The nineteenth century white slave trade stories and contemporary trafficking stories highlight the uncaring parents who sell children into servitude and the cruel 'people traffickers' who exploit them financially and sexually. This characterisation shows little respect for parenting customs and social mores of other countries where, for example, to send a child or young person away to live (and possibly to work) may not be seen as harmful, but instead, may be understood as a form of socialisation, and an opportunity to give your beloved child the start in life which they could not otherwise expect. Pearce (2011) is critical of the continual focus in contemporary child trafficking accounts on perpetrators as 'foreign'. She asserts that 'othering' diverts attention from the abuse and exploitation that is perpetrated by indigenous UK citizens (2011: 14). Young similarly argues that responses to 'otherness' are sometimes expressed in terms of demonization, and at other times with humanitarian undertones. Whichever the case, they are likely to be 'grossly disproportionate' (2009: 13).

The presentation of child trafficking also sheds light on our ambivalent feelings about sex, and particularly, children and sex. Jackson points out that although legislation which fixes an age of consent 'ostensibly' seeks to protect, in practice, it demarcates

those below it as 'lacking in sexual agency' (2006: 235). The purpose of trafficking stories is, then, to reclaim and safeguard a state of childhood innocence (Gittins, 1998), yet they do so by titillating, they excite at the same time as encouraging moral outrage. Social work has since its beginnings been at the forefront of establishing, and then maintaining the line between acceptable and unacceptable sexual behaviour (Own author, 1995 and 2008). By responding to child trafficking panics without critical reflection, we become part of the problem, reinforcing negative stereotypes and failing to offer a *social* analysis to the problem.

### Conclusion

We have argued that the presentation of child trafficking in the late nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries stands as an illustration of a moral panic. This is not only a theoretical concern. Moral panics do harm in the 'real' world, victimising some and demonizing others, while at the same time, championing moral entrepreneurs and masking the underlying issues which are at stake. The child trafficking scenario highlights society's ambivalent attitudes to children and childhood, to age, to gender and sexuality, and to 'race' and racism; it also demonstrates the perverse outcomes of our current harsh immigration policy. These are matters which must concern social work as much as the protection of vulnerable children.

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